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A LATE MEDIEVAL SABER FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE ROUSSE REGIONAL MUSEUM OF HISTORY¹

Abstract: This paper presents an unpublished late medieval saber, found during illegal activity in the medieval fortress near village of Nisovo, Ruse region in Bulgaria. It demonstrates the use of these weapons during the decline of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom and the early Ottoman period. This weapon was probably part of the panoply of the Balkan warriors and the Ottoman Turks, who fought against them in the late 14th – 15th centuries. The form of this saber is a precursor to those types which developed throughout Eastern Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Key words: sabers, Late Middle Ages, Second Bulgarian Kingdom, Early Ottomans, weapons in works of art.

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The object of the current examination is a well-preserved saber, kept in the collections of the Rousse Regional Museum of History, Inv. No. III 2507. The weapon is of interest not only because of its good state of preservation, despite its time in the ground, but also due to its association with a medieval site from this area – the Nisovo fortress, near the village of Nisovo, district of Ruse. Significantly despite the availability of data for the use of the saber in late medieval Bulgaria, and in the neighboring Byzantine Empire and Serbia, there are few publications which deal with artefacts of this type after the early 13th century.

During the second half of the 14th and the entire 15th centuries, the East Balkans were the heart of a region that greatly influenced and dictated the military fashion in Eastern Europe for the next two centuries. Unfortunately, the weapons from this period are relatively uncommon. This has caused significant problems for researchers when it comes to tracing the processes which led to the

appearance and development of the forms and fashions, typical for the 16th-17th centuries. In this paper the authors hope to manage in convincing the readers that the saber from Nisovo belongs to this transitional period, which is important for the weapons’ history.

Circumstances of discovery

It is known that the saber was discovered in the fortress, which occupies a rock terrace, shaped by the influx of the rivers Beli Lom and Mali Lom, located 2 km to the southwest from the village of Nisovo (Fig. 1). The fortress has an irregular shape and measures around 300 m in length with a width of 150 m. A fortification wall is visible in the field, measuring 170 m in length, which fences the access to the surrounding plateau in southeast direction (Īordanov 1993, 9). Surface finds within the fortifications include fragments of ceramic vessels from the Thracian period and Late Antiquity, as well as from the Second Bulgarian Kingdom.²

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² There is information that during the illegal treasure-hunter’s activity in the fortress a large number of coins and other materials from the time of Second Bulgarian Kingdom (12th-14th centuries) was unearthed. In the northern foot of the hill was discovered a hoard of 330 copper Byzantine coins from the first half of the 13th century.

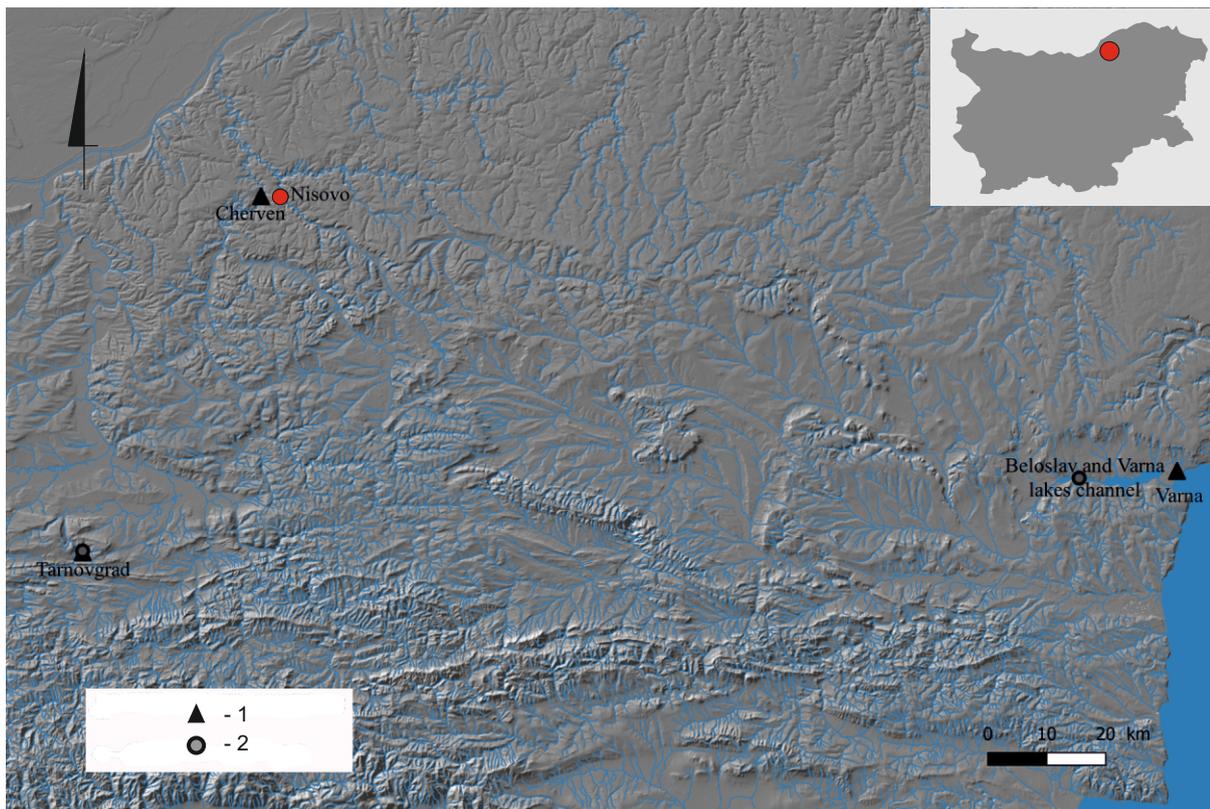


Fig. 1. Map of north-eastern Bulgaria with marked spots of sabre finds: 1 – medieval urban centre; 2 – medieval sabre find. *Elaborated by D. Rabovyanov.*

Ryc. 1. Mapa północno-wschodniej Bułgarii z zaznaczonymi miejscami odkryć szabel: 1 – średniowieczny kompleks osadniczy; 2 – znalezisko średniowiecznej szabli. *Oprac. D. Rabovyanov.*

Nearby are located two rock-hewn monasteries – the Big and the Small Nisovo monasteries – another fortress from the Early Byzantine period (5th-6th centuries) and the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (12th-14th centuries) – the so-called “Chilingir kale” – as well as several settlements and necropolises of an uncertain medieval date (Stanchev 1995, 235-236; Totev, Dermendzhiev, Koseva 2002, 821, bel. 6).

Despite the fact that the Nisovo fortress has not undergone archaeological excavations, the small amount of information derived from the illegal treasure-hunters' activities leave no doubt as to its functioning during the Second Bulgarian Kingdom.³ The presence of the other sites from the period around it (Fig. 1), as well as the proximity of the region's center in the 13th-14th centuries – the town of Cherven, capital of an administrative region and the seat of an archbishop – testifies to the prosperity and significance of the Rusenski Lom river valley for the Bulgarian state at least until the campaign of the Ottoman military leader Ali Pasha in Northern Bulgaria (1388).

For the main fortress and center of the area – Cherven – there is evidence that it maintained its role as a fortified center throughout the 15th century. The information for this period is kept mainly in the timars' lists and the tax registers. Two registers from the sandjak of Nikopol mention the name of Cherven and contemporary Christian households. In the 15th century it is still described as being a town, but the tax registers from the middle of the 16th century refer to it as a village (TIBI 1966, 299; 1974, 125-127). Other fortresses in Northern Bulgaria, like the capital of Tarnovo, Nikopol, Svishtov, Drastar, Shumen, Madara, etc., also remained centers of military presence during the Early Ottoman period. The lack of similar data of the fortress of Nisovo, as well as the proximity of Cherven rather direct us towards the fact that the fortress of Nisovo most likely did not maintain its role during the Early Ottoman period (Fig. 1). Therefore, it is more probable that the saber from Nisovo is related to the Second Bulgarian Kingdom or the period of its conquest by the Ottoman Turks during the last decades of the 14th century.

³ The authors have information that the saber was found along with big processional cross during illegal treasure hunters' activities.

Description of the saber

As mentioned above, the saber from the fortress near Nisovo is relatively well preserved (Fig. 2). The surface corrosion on the iron body of the weapon, as well as the detached iron cross-guard clearly indicate it spent a considerable period under ground. Along the blade and the tang there are no deformations, the cross-guard is also present. The state of preservation of one of the grip's rivets directs us towards the conclusion that its hilt was probably made of wood which deteriorated in the soil. It is hard to conclude whether the saber was fitted with a pommel. This is very probable, but even at the registration of the item in the museum, such a pommel was missing. Whether there was such a pommel or not, it was not attached to the tang through a rivet, which is often the case with some sabers.

The total length of the saber is 81.8 cm, of which the smoothly curved blade measures 71.6 cm. The curve of the blade is slight for the first two-thirds of its length but becomes more acute in the final third, several centimeters before the well-shaped yelman (false edge) which has a length of 19.7 cm. The tip is triangular, almost symmetrical, with slightly arc-shaped sides. In the false edge section, the blade has two cutting edges and a flattened lenticular section. Behind the false edge until the heel, the blade is single-edged, with a slightly asymmetrical flattened triangular section. The width of the blade is 4 cm at the base, 3.5 cm before the false edge and 3.7 cm at its widest part. Its thickness is 0.6 cm at the base and 0.3 cm at the tip.

The flat tang has a square-section shape and measures 9.7 cm in length and 1.1 cm in width, becoming narrower and round at the end. Two rivet holes are present in the middle, measuring 2.2 and 5.3 cm away from the tip. The holes are round, with diameter of 0.4 cm and have been pierced from one side, which has led to a ring of material being pushed out on the other. In the opening at the end of the hilt an iron rivet has been preserved with cylindrical body and semi-spherical head, with length of 2.4 and thickness of 0.37 cm. In the lower part of the tang (which is 0.6 cm thick) there are apparent traces of repair. The base of the original tang is surrounded by two narrow lamellae with bent ends, which shape the larger section of the grip. All of them are connected between themselves through forge-welding.

Both in its original appearance, and after its repair, the relatively short hilt of the weapon is slightly angled towards the cutting edge of the blade. The current length of the hilt tang is 9.7 cm, but together with the wooden hilt and the likely presence of a pommel, it probably exceeded 10.0 cm, which is enough for a comfortable grip with one hand and is typical for large number of the sabers from the 12th to 15th centuries.

The iron cross-guard of the saber is of the so-called "diamond type". It is large, probably made of two symmetrical halves, joined together by forge welding – the traces of which are not visible. It measures 8.6 cm in length and varies in height from 7.0 cm in the middle at the projections and 1.1 cm at the end of the arms. Its thickness is correspondingly 2.8 cm in the middle and 1.3 cm at the end. The arms of the cross-guard are thick, with a tetragonal to round cross-section, while the significantly narrower and thinner projections in line with the tang and blade have an oval cross-section. Both have slightly rounded tips, and a ridge runs along the middle of the arms and the projections. The blade passes through an oval opening in the cross-guard, measuring 4.6-4.8 to 1.8 cm, which narrows to 2.4 to 2.1 cm for the tang. The opening has allowed to place the cross-guard on the tang and fit at the base of the blade. The bases of the wooden hilt were attached to it on its opposite side. The elements of the hilt were additionally strengthened by an inner pair of projections on the cross-guard. Because of this, there is no opening in the lowest part of the hilt tang.⁴ The surface of the cross-guard is too corroded in order for any decoration to be observed, however, it is unlikely there was any.

Currently the weight of the saber is 730 g, and despite the corrosion and loss of some elements such as the wooden grip and pommel, it is unlikely it originally weighed significantly more. The blade exhibits some damage along the cutting edge but this was probably the result of combat rather than corrosion.

Given the dimensions, the proportions and the shape of the weapon, including the false edge which makes the front part of the blade heavier⁵, the saber was eminently designed for cutting and slashing blows. The angle of the hilt towards the axis of the blade along with the well-shaped tip on a relatively short and gently curved blade, would

⁴ In fact, this is also the reason for the wide popularity of this guard, which appeared in the 14th century. The external pair locks the saber in a more stable way inside the sheath and acts as a guard against a weapon sliding down the blade. The inside pair covers and stabilizes the hilts of the grip. Along with this, the metal reflection of the projections creates a decorative effect on the background of the sheath and cross-guard, which are most often dark.

⁵ The point of balance of the weapon is close to the cross guard.

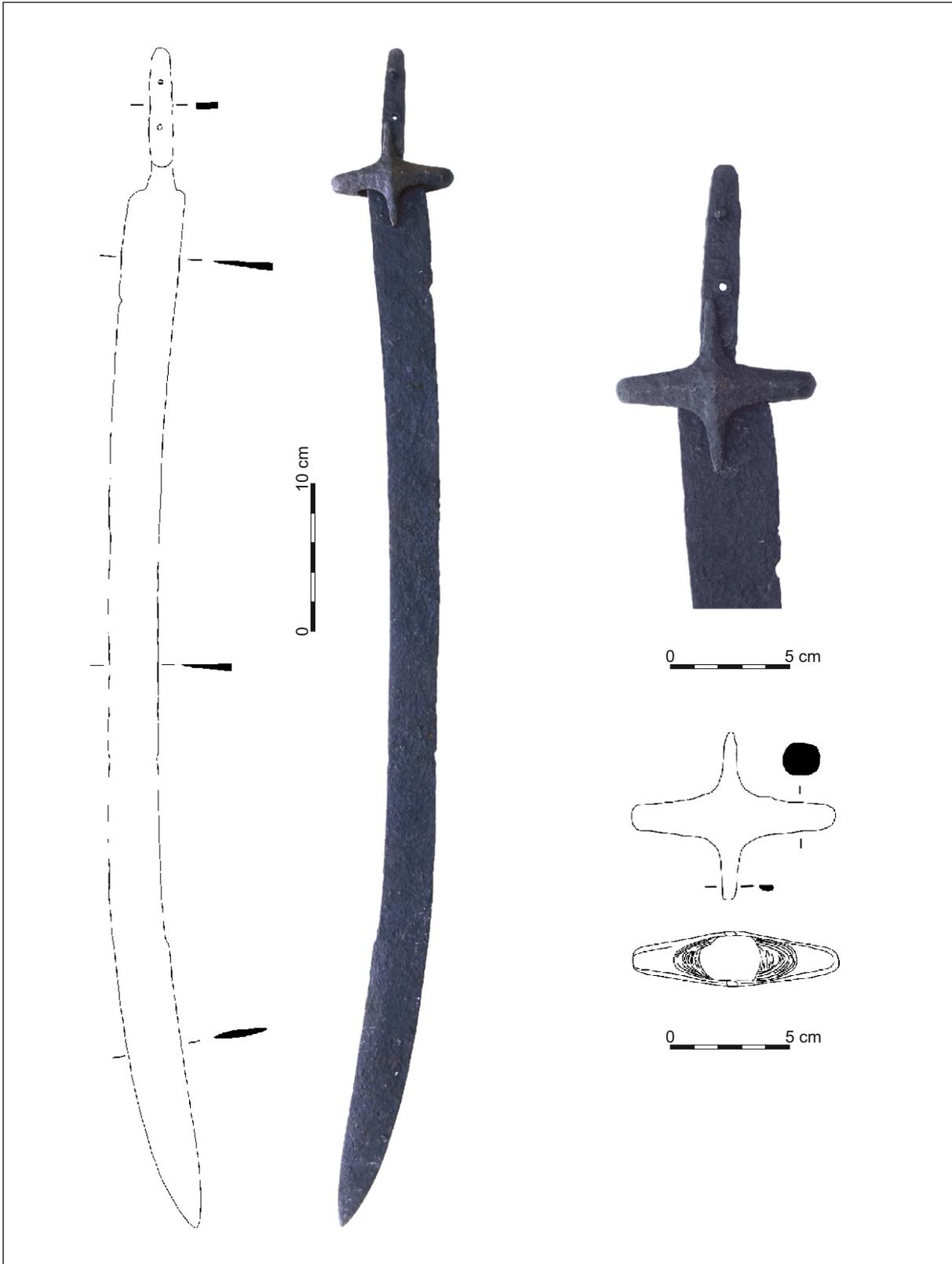


Fig. 2. Saber from Nisovo, Rousse Regional Museum of History, Inv. No. III 2507. Photo by D. Rabovyanov; drawing by S. Velikova.

Ryc. 2. Szabla z Nisova, Regionalne Muzeum Historyczne w Rousse, nr inw. III 2507. Fot. D. Rabovyanov; rys. S. Velikova.

also enable effective piercing strikes as well.⁶ This reflects all European tendency related to changes in protective armament in the late 14th-15th centuries and an increasing role of plate defences.

Origin and dating

The context of discovery cannot provide us with certain and narrow dating of the saber. In general, it is thought to belong to the period of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (13th-14th centuries), but this does not exclude a connection to the Early Ottoman period (late 14th – 15th century). Consequently, comparison with other similar weapons has been sought within this date-range. In this case, we are largely benefited by the good state of preservation of the item and of the presence of its cross-guard (Fig. 2). As we will see further in the current text, however, the number of comparative examples are limited and in some cases raise more questions than answers.

For the presentation of the analogies, attention will be given not only to the functional features of the weapon but also to the characteristic cross-guard with its large arms and visible projections towards the grip and the blade.

Analogies among preserved artefacts

A saber with missing cross-guard, preserved by the Museum of Archaeology in Varna under number IV 57 (Fig. 3:1) is a close parallel to our find. It was discovered in 1923, during the excavation of the canal between the Varna and the Beloslav lakes (Kuzev 1973, 148-150, Fig. 4). The saber is extremely similar in shape, proportions and dimensions (it has total length of 88.0 cm) to the one from Nisovo, and possesses the same short, slightly angled hilt with two rivet holes in its upper half.

The weapon was discovered along with others; namely a saber, a sword, axes, spearheads and arrowheads, the bronze head of a mace. Traditionally this diverse collection is associated with the battle of Varna which took place on November 10, 1444, when the army of the Polish and Hungarian king Vladislav III Jagiello was defeated by the Ottomans, led by sultan Murad II. This association was first presented by Alexander Kuzev (*ibidem*, 147-150), and by many others after that, among whom was Valery Īotov as researcher of the arms

and armour (Yotov 2015, 91-93). However, it should be noted that if some of the weapons from this assemblage can certainly be dated to the end of the 14th – first half of the 15th century, the dating of other items is much wider.⁷ This is not surprising, given the presence of a bridge in the canal between the lakes at that place.

As we will see below from other examples, the saber from the Varna Museum of Archaeology should not be excluded, but nonetheless it cannot be used as a precisely dated analogue from the first half of the 15th century. However, it remains an important example for the distribution of this type of saber in the Eastern Balkans, since it is a second, almost identical example from the territory of contemporary Northeastern Bulgaria.

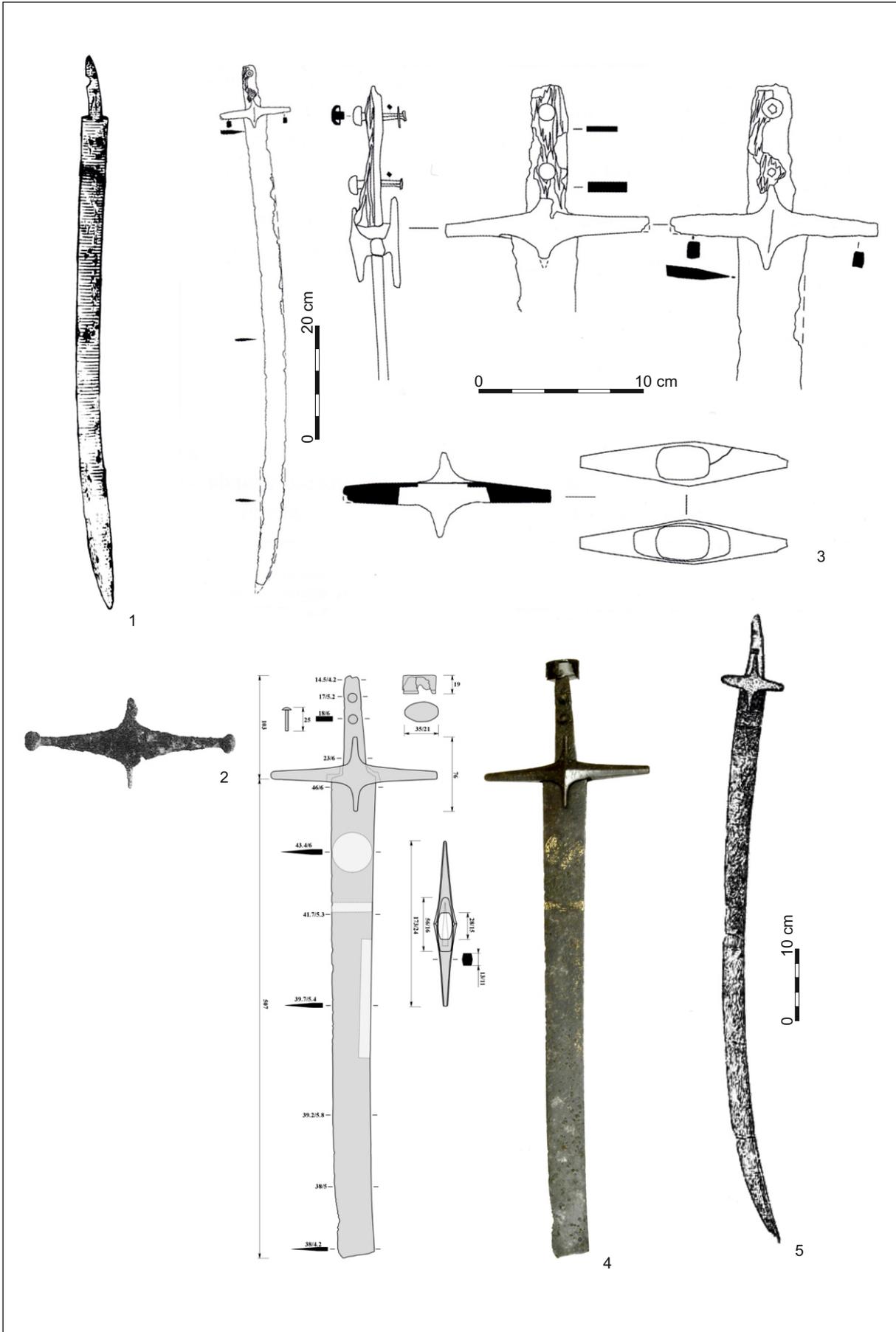
Among the analogous material from Bulgaria, there is also an iron cross-guard, discovered during the archaeological excavations at the primary citadel of the capital of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom of Tarnovgrad – the Tsarevets fortress (Fig. 3:2).⁸ Its similarity to the saber from Nisovo is obvious, but its arms are longer and narrower – 14.5 cm in length, 6.7 cm in width, and ended with balls. Given the continuous habitation of Tsarevets until the 19th century, it is hard to exclude a later dating of the item. This is also suggested by the complex shape of its arms. Anyway, in original publication it was stressed that its origin from medieval layer from 14th – first decades of 15th century, so this analogy can't be excluded from information.

The next parallel is located some considerable distance away from Nisovo, but is still worth examining. It concerns a recently published saber, discovered near the village of Igumnovo in the Serpukhov region of the District of Moscow, Russian Federation (Fig. 3:3). It was discovered along with other items and coins, dating between the end of the 14th century and the 1460s, and is thought to possess either a Turkish or Mamluk origin because of the traces of a golden cartouche on the blade (Pavlikhin, Aksenov 2019, 253-261). Notably longer (around 93.5 cm) and correspondingly straighter than the one from Nisovo, it has a similar cross-guard, but with longer arms and the same short grip with two rivets. The blade, which is identical in width, has not preserved its false edge.

⁶ Cf. note 3.

⁷ An example for this is the bronze mace with human heads, referred by Adam Kubik to the 9th-10th centuries (Kubik 2018, 191-194).

⁸ The cross-guard is wrongfully referred as having belonged to a sword, discovered inside the residential buildings of the so-called *neighbourhood at the third gate* at the main entrance of Tsarevets (Site XXVIII), next to the south fortification wall, in a 14th– first decades of the 15th century layer (Dolmova 2007, 129-130, 135, 191, tabl. VIII:13).



Both the context of the find and other examples reasonably indicate the saber from Igumnovo dates to the period between the end of the 14th and the middle of the 15th century, and it probably reflects the connections of the Moscow Principality with the Crimean khans during the 15th century (ibidem, 253, 261).

Again with Mamluk origin and dating, probably from the 15th century, is also a partially preserved saber with a broken tip which was discovered in 2014 in a forest zone at the Chuhuiv region in the District of Kharkov, Ukraine (Fig. 3:4) (Prokopenko 2019, 268-275, ris. 1-4). Although it is obviously a weapon with larger dimensions than the saber from Nisovo, it has the same geometry and proportions of the blade and the hilt. Correspondingly, its longer cross-guard is of an identical shape and width.

An important example, but with a very broad date range (middle of the 13th – 14th century) is saber from a mountain necropolis connected with the Ingush tribes in the North Caucasus (Fig. 3:5). It has the same angled hilt and cross guard like the saber from Nisovo, but the blade lacks the false edge.⁹

Among the close analogies from the region is a saber from a Late Medieval burial at Anapa, Krasnodar Kraï, preserved at the State Museum of History in Moscow (Inv. No. 33616, op. 509, No. 2) (Fig. 4:1). It is dated to the 16th century because of some archaic characteristic, it is 87.3 cm long, and its blade is narrower than the one from Nisovo – 3.6-3.8 cm (Kurmanovskii 2014, 151-154, Fig 10). Although less curved and straighter, it demonstrates an identical cross-guard like the one from Nisovo and the same short inclined grip.

An analogous example is a rather long (110.0 cm) Mamluk saber from Syria or Egypt, preserved under Inv. No. R-992 in the Furusiyya Art Foundation Collection (Fig. 4:2) and listed as No. 16 in the catalogue of the collection (Bashir 2008, 50-51). Dated broadly to the 14th-15th centuries, its similarity to other Mamluk and Ottoman sabers from the second half of the 15th century, like the ones associated with sultan Mehmed II on Topkapi,

make a 15th century date more likely. Excluding its larger dimensions, it has identical geometry and proportions of the hilt and the blade to the saber from Nisovo.

Again, a close parallel is another Mamluk saber, related to sultan Qaitbay, reigned in the second half of 15th century, kept in the collection of the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul (Fig. 4:3), whose hilt and cross-guard has been changed during the 18th century (Prokopenko 2019, 271, Fig. 5:v). Again, despite the fact that it is longer (89 cm), its blade is extremely close in geometry and proportions to the one of the Nisovo saber.

Along with the saber of Qaitbay from Topkapi, other high-status weapons of this type from the second half of the 15th – early 16th centuries also demonstrate a direct relation to the saber from Nisovo. Primarily among them we should refer to two sabers with remarkable dimensions and decoration, kept at the Topkapi museum. These are the weapons that bear the name of sultan Mehmed II (1441-1446, 1451-1481), the conqueror of Constantinople. If the one with Inv. No. 1/375 (Aydin 2014, 64) has length of 1.00 m (Fig. 4:4) and could have served as real weapon, the richly decorated Inv. No. 1/90 (Fig. 4:5) has length of 1.26 m probably served a ceremonial function.

Similar in shape is also a possible Tatar saber from the 15th-16th centuries measuring 93.0 cm in length also from the Furusiyya Art Foundation Collection (Fig. 4:6) and the blade of another one from the early 16th century with a Mamluk origin from the same collection (cf. Bashir 2008, 55, No. 20).

The differences of these sabers to that from Nisovo are clearly visible. Their blades are longer and straighter (some of them even have fullers), and their cross-guards are elongated and exhibit a more complex shape to the ends of the arms. We therefore have a group of subsequent derivatives from the Nisovo example, which reflect its development during the second half of the 15th – early 16th centuries.

Fig. 3. Close analogies of saber from Nisovo: 1 – saber from channel between Varna and Beloslav lakes near Varna (Bulgaria) (end of the 14th – first half of the 15th century), no scale; 2 – saber guard from Tsarevets fortress in Veliko Tarnovo (Bulgaria) (14th – first decades of the 15th century), no scale; 3 – saber, discovered near the village of Igumnovo, Moscow distr. (Russia) (the end of the 14th century – 1460s); 4 – saber from Chuhuiv region, Kharkov distr. (Ukraine) (15th century); 5 – saber from grave No. 2 at cemetery near Verkhniï Leïmi, North Caucasus (Russia) (1 – after Kuzev 1973, Pl. II:1; 2 – after Dolmova 2007, 225, Pl. VIII:13; 3 – after Pavlikhin, Aksenov 2019, Fig. 2; 4 – after Prokopenko 2019, Fig. 2; 5 – after Chakhkiev 1985, Fig. 11).

Ryc. 3. Bliskie analogie do szabli z Nisova: 1 – szabla pochodząca z kanału rozdzielającego jeziora Varna i Beloslav w pobliżu Warny (Bułgaria) (koniec XIV – pierwsza połowa XV w.), bez skali; 2 – jelec szabli z twierdzy Carevec w Wielkim Tarnowie (Bułgaria) (XIV – pierwsze dekady XV w.), bez skali; 3 – szabla odkryta w pobliżu wsi Igumnovo, obw. moskiewski (Rosja) (koniec XIV – l. 60. XV w.); 4 – szabla z rejonu Čuhuiv, obw. charkowski (Ukraina) (XV w.); 5 – szabla z grobu nr 2 odkrytego na cmentarzysku w pobliżu miejscowości Verkhnij Lejmi, Kaukaz Północny (Rosja) (1 – wg Kuzev 1973, tabl. II:1; 2 – wg Dolmova 2007, 225, tabl. VIII:13; 3 – wg Pavlikhin, Aksenov 2019, ris. 2; 4 – wg Prokopenko 2019, ris. 2; 5 – wg Chakhkiev 1985, ris. 11).

⁹ About this interesting assemblage of arms and armour from Mongol period see Chakhkiev (1985, 60-67).

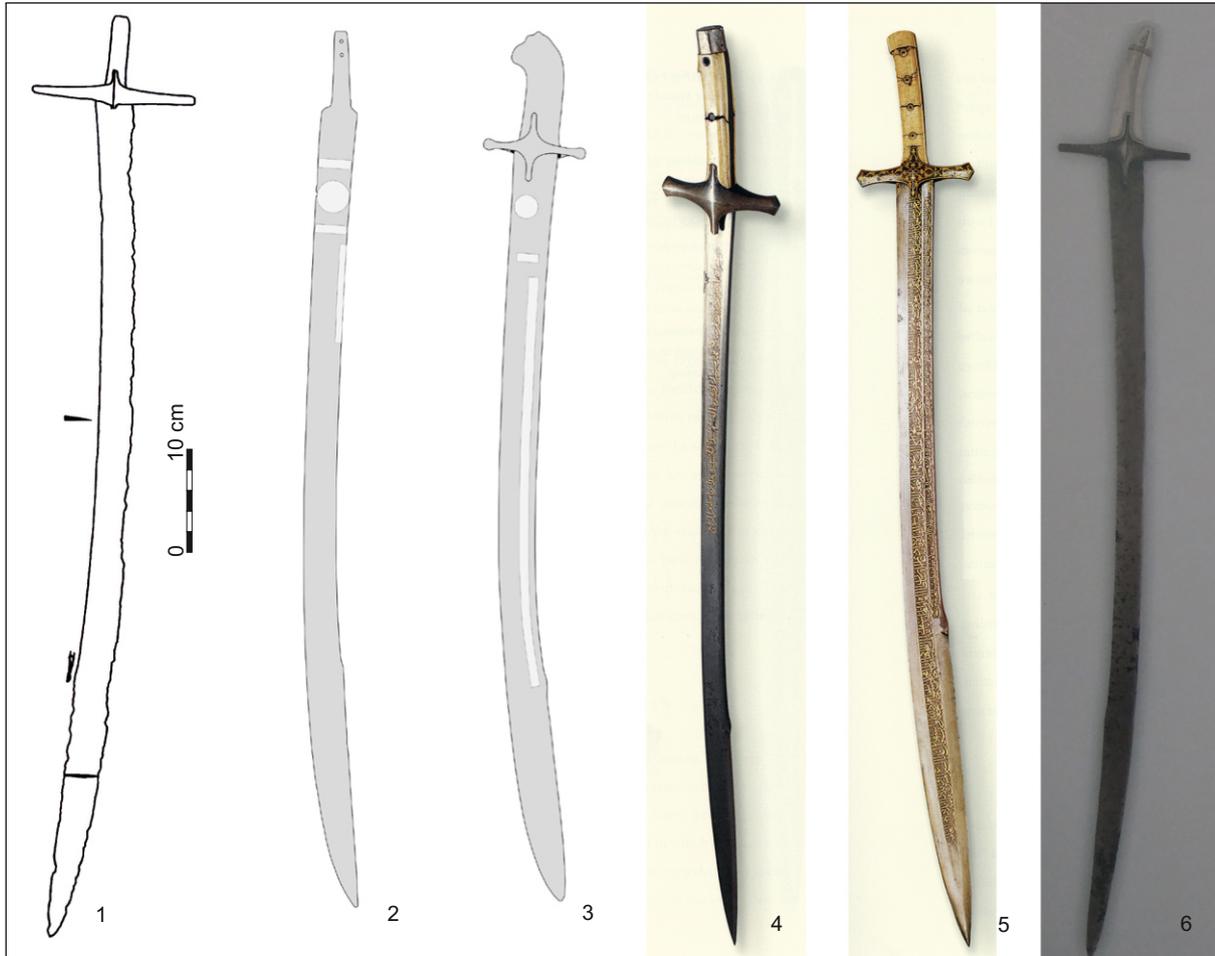


Fig. 4. Analogies of saber from Nisovo: 1 – saber from Anapa, Krasnodar Kraï (Russia) (16th century); 2 – Mamluk saber from Syria or Egypt (14th-15th centuries), Furusiyya Art Foundation Collection, Inv. No. R-992, no scale; 3 – Mamluk saber, related to sultan Qaitbay (the second half of the 15th century), Topkapi museum in Istanbul, no scale; 4 – Saber of Mehmed II (second half of the 15th – early 16th century), Topkapi museum in Istanbul, Inv. No. 1/375, no scale; 5 – saber of Mehmed II (second half of the 15th – early 16th century), Topkapi museum in Istanbul, Inv. No. 1/90, no scale; 6 – saber from Furusiyya Art Foundation Collection, no scale (1 – after Kurmanovskii 2014, Fig. 10; 2-3 – after Prokopenko 2019, Fig. 5:b-v; 4-5 – after Aydin 2014, 64, 73; 6 – after Bashir 2008, 54, No. 19).

Ryc. 4. Analogie do szabli z Nisova: 1 – szabla z Anapy, Kraj Krasnodarski (Rosja) (XVI w.); 2 – szabla mamelucka z Syrii lub Egiptu (XIV-XV w.), Furusiyya Art Foundation Collection, nr inw. R-992, bez skali; 3 – szabla mamelucka wiązana z sułtanem Kajtbajem (druga połowa XV w.), Topkapi museum w Istambule, bez skali; 4 – szabla Mehmeda II (druga połowa XV – początek XVI w.), Topkapi museum w Istambule, nr inw. 1/375, bez skali; 5 – szabla Mehmeda II (druga połowa XV – początek XVI w.), Topkapi museum w Istambule, nr inw. 1/90, bez skali; 6 – szabla z Furusiyya Art Foundation Collection, bez skali (1 – wg Kurmanovskij 2014, ris. 10; 2-3 – wg Prokopenko 2019, ris. 5:b-v; 4-5 – wg Aydin 2014, 64, 73; 6 – wg Bashir 2008, 54, nr 19).

Among the analogies, significant attention should be paid to one of the most typical features of the saber from Nisovo – its cross-guard (Fig. 2). The saber cross-guard with raised ridges in the middle has a long development and wide use during the 13th and 14th centuries (Alexander 2004, 148-182). As has recently been shown, during the 15th-16th centuries the widely distributed cross-guards have long and symmetrical projections (Prokopenko 2019, 273-275). The Russian researcher Vladimir Kurmanovskii places them under type 2 of his typology and divides them in two versions – shorter and larger, which applies to

our saber, and longer and narrower (Kurmanovskii 2014, 152, 153, 154, Fig. 2). This type also differs in construction from the earlier ones, since it is large, with clearly visible vertical projections and a large oval opening for the blade and the tang for the grip.

In this particular case, our interest is towards the cross-guards, whose arm endings do not expand, which is more often case of this type, but become slightly narrower. The cross-guard, discovered in the fortress of Tsarevets in Veliko Tarnovo (Fig. 3:2), is closer in terms of physical location, and was dated to the 14th and the first

decades of the 15th century, however its chronology remain uncertain. Undisputedly the closest is the iron cross-guard, discovered in Burial No. 1 in Mound No. 1 of the Balabani II necropolis of the Tarakliiā region of Moldova (Fig. 5:1) (Postică, Sava 1996, 69, 76, 77, Fig. 5:2). The Burial 1 was dated to the 14th century (Postică, Sava 1996, 69, 76-77; Prokopenko 2019, 272). With length of 10.0 cm, height of 7.0 cm and width of 2.7 cm, it differs from the Nisovo saber only by the flat ends.

Another close and important parallel is the dagger from Grave No. 23 of the Zhukov necropolis in Krasnodar Krai of Russian Federation (Fig. 5:2). It was discovered under the left femur of a young man, and its cross-guard with protuberate projections and straight arms with rounded endings has a length of 8.5 cm and height of 4.0 cm. The necropolis is associated with the Golden Horde and is dated to the 14th century (Kuleshov, Nicheporuk 2012, 182-183, Fig. 1). Although here the cross-guard had been used for a shorter weapon – a dagger, it has the same morphological and constructional features despite its smaller dimensions.

The central burial (No. 2) of the mound at Balabani is thought to date to between the 1260s and 1310 because of a Mamluk mace, discovered there. In fact, this also supports the theory of some researchers who connect the distribution of this type of cross-guards in Eastern Europe with Mamluk influence from the Middle East (Prokopenko 2019, 274-275). On this basis Volodymyr Prokopenko goes further, presuming that the smooth narrowing of the ends of the cross-guards indicates an earlier dating and archaicism. However, is this true?

It is a fact that so far most of the known specimens from the 14th-15th centuries with a similar cross-guard can be related to the Mamluk military tradition. The cross-guards with narrowing endings among them are, however, very rare. Except for the sabers mentioned above, an example for their use is given by a larger group of swords and several sabers, whose hilts and decoration leave no doubt of their common origin and the Mamluk's preference towards the saber as a weapon (Alexander 2004, 148-182). Of them only one sword from the collection of the Topkapi palace (Inv. No. 1/128/III22) has a cross-guard with narrowing endings, which is however much straighter than the saber from Nisovo. This one, similar to other swords from this group, has the hilt of a saber.

The analogies in the iconography

For the clarification of the larger number of problem, related to this type of saber and its typical cross-guard, iconographic sources are particularly useful. In particular, a large group of miniatures from West Iran, dated from the 14th to the first half of the 15th century. Their accuracy was noted a long time ago by Mikhail Gorelik in relation to the armour (Gorelik 1979, 31-51). These detailed drawings present with extreme precision the military fashion of Iranian warriors, which especially in the 14th century were strongly influenced by the Mongols.

Furthermore, on miniatures of two scrolls by Shāh-Nāmeḥ of Tabriz, correspondingly from around 1340-1350 (Fig. 6:1) and from around 1370-1380, there are sabers with wide, slightly curved blades with short grips, inclined towards the cutting edge and large cross-guards with straight arms and shallow triangle ridges (ibidem, Figs. 41, 45-47).

On a large group of miniatures from the end of the same century it is possible to observe weapons that bear the characteristics of the saber from Nisovo and its parallels. Such sabers are displayed in Shāh-Nāmeḥ of Shiraz (around 1397) (Fig. 6:2), in Garshāsp-Nāmeḥ and in other epic poems by Asadī, also from Shiraz (around 1397-1398) (Fig. 6:3) and in “Three Metric Romances” by Khwāju Kermānī, drawn by Junayd-al-Sultānīn Bagdad around 1396 (Fig. 6:4).

On miniatures from the first half of the 15th century we can observe visibly longer and straighter sabers, some of which feature an elman, with the same cross-guards with projections, with either widening or narrowing ends of the arms. Such are “Shāh-Nāmeḥ” of Ferdawsī of Herat (around 1440), the same from Shiraz (around 1435) and another, again from Shiraz (around 1420-1430) (ibidem, Figs. 55-57).

For more than a century, these miniatures reveal an evolution of shapes, which we also observe among surviving examples. It is not surprising, because we can observe such a line of development with on another important sources related to the development of weaponry in the Balkans. These are frescoes from the late 13th – early 15th centuries.

In fact, sabers appear on images within the Byzantine sphere of influence as late as the Late Byzantine period. Until then, their identification in iconographical and written sources (case of “paramerion”) seem to be very disputable (Parani 2003, 131-135; Grotowski 2010, 357-360).¹⁰

¹⁰ On the issue of the character of the weapon called “paramerion” and the earlier use of sabers in the East Balkans, see Rabovianov (2019 – and the literature, cited there).

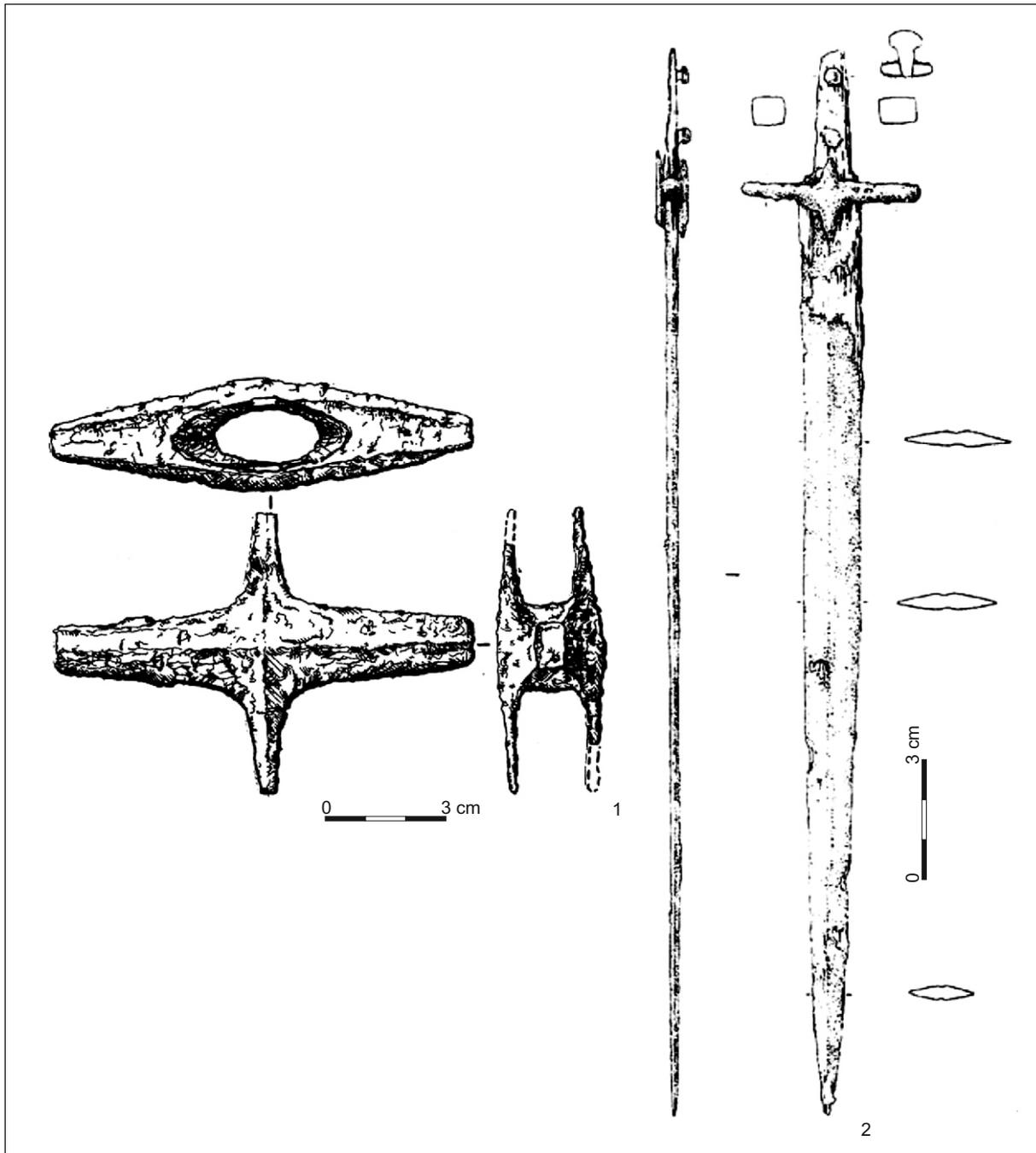


Fig. 5. Saber's cross guards – analogies to saber from Nisovo: 1 – saber cross guard from burial No. 1 in mound No. 1 of the Balabani II necropolis in the Tarakliia region (Moldova) (14th century); 2 – dagger from grave No. 23 of the Zhukov cemetery in the Crimean region of Krasnodar Krai (Russia) (14th century) (1 – after *Postică, Sava 1996, Fig. 52*; 2 – after *Kuleshov, Nichaporuk 2012, Fig. 1*).

Ryc. 5. Jelce szabli – analogie do szabli z Nisova: 1 – jelec szabli z pochówku nr 1 w kurhanie nr 1 na cmentarzysku Balabani II w rejonie Tarakliá (Mołdawia) (XIV w.); 2 – sztylet z grobu nr 2 na cmentarzysku w miejscowości Żukow w rejonie krymskim Krasnodarskiego Kraju (Rosja) (XIV w.) (1 – wg *Postică, Sava 1996, Fig. 52*; 2 – wg *Kuleshov, Nichaporuk 2012, ris. 1*).

The study of armament, presented in iconographical sources – mainly frescoes – is not a new topic, and exceptional attention to it has

been paid by researchers from former Yugoslavia.¹¹ It is without doubt that during the period under investigation we come across realistic representations

¹¹ Regarding the sabers, see Pribaković (1954, 81), Petrović (2013, 39) and among the more recent ones Marić and Spasić (2012, 424-431, Tab. II:5-6), although the parallel, proposed by the latter, for the saber, held by St Nicetas of the Resava monastery is not the most accurate one and presents a late derivative of the weapon.



Fig. 6. Analogous sabres in miniatures from West Iran: 1 – miniature from “Shāh-Nāmeḥ” (“Book of Kings”) of Tabriz (ca. 1340-1350); 2 – miniature from “Shāh-Nāmeḥ” (“Book of Kings”) of Shiraz (ca. 1397); 3 – miniature from “Garshāsp-Nāmeḥ and other epic odes” by Asadī of Shiraz (ca. 1397-1398); 4 – miniature from “Three Metric Romances” by Khwāju Kermānī, drawn by Junayd-al-Sulṭānīn, Bagdad (ca. 1396) (after *Gorelik 1979, Figs. 41, 51-52, 54*).

Fig. 6. Analogiczne szable w przedstawieniach z miniatur pochodzących z zachodniego Iranu: 1 – miniatura z „Shāh-Nāmeḥ” („Księga Królów”), Tebriz (ok. 1340-1350); 2 – miniatura z „Shāh-Nāmeḥ” („Księga Królów”), Sziraz (ok. 1397); 3 – miniatura z “Garshāsp-Nāmeḥ i inne opowieści epickie” Asadiego z Szirazu (ok. 1397-1398); 4 – miniatura autorstwa Junayd-al-Sulṭānīina z “Trzech Romansów” Khwāju Kermānīego, Bagdad (ok. 1396) (wg *Gorelik 1979, Figs. 41, 51-52, 54*).

of weaponry, such as swords, maces, crossbows and armory equipment, etc. In the case of defensive equipment, realism is often mixed or masked by artistic conventions and the pursuit of aesthetic appeal.

The sabres, presented on frescoes, confirm this statement. Among them is outlined a group of images, most of which are from the region of the present-day Republic of North Macedonia and Mount Athos from the late 13th century and the first decades of the 14th century. Although most of them

are connected to the activities of the painter Michael Astrapas, i.e. they apparently reflect the use of one and the same patterns and models,¹² this does not change the accuracy of the weaponry depicted. This concerns the sabres on the images of St Mercurius from the Holy Mother of God Peribleptos church in Ohrid (1295) (Fig. 7:1), St Mercurius from the St George church in Staro Nagorichane (1317) (cf. *Gorgievski 2007, sl. 14*), another depiction of St Mercurius from the Protaton church in Karyes, Mount Athos

¹² For these images of warrior saints and the participation of Michael Astrapas in their depiction, see *Gorgievski (2007; 2011), Marković (2010) and Vojvodić (2016)*.

(ca. 1300) (ibidem, Fig. 28), St Nicetas from the church of the Gracanica monastery (1321) (Fig. 7:2) and Archangel Michael from the St Demetrius church in Peć (1316-1342) (Fig. 7:3). All of them have wide blades with different degree of curves, short hilts and well-formed straight symmetric cross-guards, some of which like the sabers of St Mercurius of Peribleptos and of Archangel Michael of Peć also have wide triangular ridges across the face in the middle. Despite the fact that they demonstrate morphological proximity to the saber from Nisovo, they clearly have a close relation to some weapons from the 12th-13th centuries. This is especially visible on the image St Nicetas of Gracanica and on Archangel Michael of Peć (Fig. 7:b-c), where an asymmetrical cross-guard sleeve is depicted at the base of the blade.¹³ In both cases, however, although accurately presented, its longer part is not along the cutting edge, but along the back of the weapon. This probably reflects the lack of understanding on behalf of the painter, who tried to illustrate an old or an unfamiliar model of a weapon.

Despite the fact that they demonstrate proximity to the type of sabers, examined by us, these visual analogies lack some of the essential features, such as the presence of an false edge and the expressed projections in the middle of the cross-guard. The latter is visible only at the saber in hand of Archangel Michael of Peć (Fig. 7:3). Other such weapons, depicted on frescoes from the 14th century like the presentation of the “Vine of Jesse” in the church of the Gracanica monastery, Archangel Michael from the church of the Lesnovo Monastery and a miniature from the “Tomić Psalter” (Fig. 7:4) demonstrate even fewer resemblances. They are acutely curved, with a large hilt with a pommel and a cross-guard of a sword, and probably depict an artistic model. It is not surprising the lack of such analogies among real examples.

In contrast to them, two monuments from the second half of the 14th and the early 15th centuries present almost precise parallels to the saber from Nisovo. The earlier is of St Mercurius, holding a bare saber, depicted in the 1370s at the chapel of the StSt Silverless, built ca. 1370 as endowment by despot Jovan Ugljesa at the Vatopedi monastery on Mount Athos (Fig. 7:5).¹⁴ Here also, according to convention, St Mercurius is depicted as a warrior-

archer, holding a bare saber, and among his armaments, a mixture of realism, convention and decoration, is distinguished his kettle-hat helmet.¹⁵ The saber, held by St Mercurius, is relatively short, with a curved blade – mainly to its front section – with an expressed elman. The upper part of the hilt is angled towards the cutting edge and already bears all of the characteristics of these weapons from the later period (15th-16th centuries). The only differences from the Nisovo saber is the strong asymmetrical tip of the weapon and the cross-guard, whose arms are slightly folded upwards, and the cross-guard’s projection is shallow and wide.

An almost identical saber to that from Nisovo is held by St Nicetas of the Holy Trinity church at the Resava monastery (ca. 1415) (Fig. 7:6). The wide, smoothly curved blade with expressed false edge, the short hilt, angled towards the cutting edge, and the straight cross-guard with narrow projections, strongly suggests a real weapon from the period, equal to the ones, cited in the text above.

Several conclusions are derived from the comparison of the frescoes. First, the sabers appear mainly on images of warrior-saints with an Eastern (Asia Minor) origin, like St Mercurius and St Niketas,¹⁶ who are both wearing the panoply of a horse warriors. Their depiction, in similarity to the other offensive weapons, is defined by a high degree of realism. There is a visible evolution in their shape; from the first group from the late 13th and the first decades of the 14th centuries which bear the characteristics of the 12th-13th century sabers, like the one examined by us, to the ones from StSt Silverless and Resava are almost an exact reflection of the saber from Nisovo. Thus, the frescoes provide evidence for the distribution of the new type of saber in the Eastern Balkans, in a cultural environment related to the Byzantine Empire, which at the time was in direct conflict with the Ottoman Turks.

Conclusions on the origin and dating

It is clear that so far, the number of representations of the type, examined by us, is relatively small in comparison to other groups, of sabers mainly from the area of the Northern Black Sea and the Caucasus. It should be noted, however, that in general the number of these weapons from the area of the Balkans and Asia

¹³ As an example for similar real weapons from the region, see Inkova (2013, 63-85, Figs. 1-2, 14, 17).

¹⁴ For the frescoes of this church, see Đurić (1961).

¹⁵ The St Martyr Mercurius was a warrior, who originated from Armenia Prima, and as such, especially in Late Byzantine arts, has always been depicted with Middle East armament, with obligatorily crossbow and arrows. Apparently during this period, the saber was already considered an obligatory attribute for the warriors of this region.

¹⁶ For St Nicetas see Marković (2008, 19-42).



Fig. 7. Analogues sabres in Byzantine iconography from Balkans: 1 – St Mercurius from the Holy Mother of God Peribleptos church in Ohrid (North Macedonia) (1295); 2 – St Nicetas from the church of the Gračanica monastery (Kosovo) (1321); 3 – Archangel Michael from the St Demetrius church in Peć (Kosovo) (1316-1342); 4 – miniature from the “Tomic Psalter” representing Goliath; 5 – St Mercurius, the chapel of the StSt Silverless (ca. 1370), Vatopedi monastery, Mount Athos (Greece); 6 – St Nicetas of the Holy Trinity church at the Resava monastery (Serbia) (ca. 1415) (1 – after *Markovic 2010, Fig. 7.a*; 2 – after *Gorgevski 2011, Fig. 3*; 3 – after *Vojvodić 2016, Fig. 223*; 4 – after *Dzhurova 1990, 247b/248*; 5 – after *Burić 1961, Fig. 3*; 6 – after *Markovic 2008, Fig. 16*).

Ryc. 7. Analogiczne szable w bizantyńskiej ikonografii z terenu Bałkanów: 1 – św. Merkuriusz z kościoła Matki Boskiej Peribleptos w Ochrydzie (Północna Macedonia) (1295); 2 – św. Nicetas z klasztoru w Gračanicy (Kosowo) (1321); 3 – Archanioł Michał z kościoła św. Demetriusza w Peć (Kosowo) (1316-1342); 4 – miniatura z “Psałterza Tomicia” ukazująca Goliata; 5 – św. Merkuriusz, kaplica Świętych Kosmy i Damiana (ok. 1370), klasztor Vatopedi, góra Athos (Grecja); 6 – św. Nicetas z kościoła św. Trójcy, klasztor w Resawie (Serbia) (ok. 1415) (1 – wg *Markovic 2010, Fig. 7.a*; 2 – wg *Gorgevski 2011, sl. 3*; 3 – wg *Vojvodić 2016, sl. 223*; 4 – wg *Dzhurova 1990, 247b/248*; 5 – wg *Burić 1961, sl. 3*; 6 – wg *Markovic 2008, Fig. 16*).

Minor from the 14th and 15th centuries is small. A typical example is Bulgaria, where for the period of the Early Middle Ages (7th-11th centuries) the saber is the predominant weapon.¹⁷ Some finds from the 9th – early 13th century reveal that, at least at first, it reduced in popularity against the straight double-edged sword. Despite that, probably under the influence of the late nomadic tribes – mainly the Cumans – it is not a rarity in the Bulgarian lands, demonstrating forms, typical for the Northern Black Sea steppes.¹⁸ However, for the period of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (13th-14th centuries), the data for the use of sabers is limited. Such is a find of part of a blade from the King's Palace at Tsarevets (Nikolova 1974, 294, 370, No. 1), the cross-guard from the same fortress (mentioned above) and a miniature from the "Tomić Psalter" from the 1340s-1360s (Fig. 7:4).¹⁹ I.e., the saber appears as an almost unknown weaponry element for this period in comparison to the far more numerous finds of straight, double-edged swords. Yet, the evidence does demonstrate their use. Examples for this are sabers from present-day Northeastern Bulgaria – the one from Nisovo and the other, discovered in the canal between the lakes near Varna – for example.

It is obvious that they present a new type of saber, which differs from the ones of the 12th-13th centuries and the ones that spread across the steppes of the Northern Black Sea and the Caucasus during the 14th century. Its typical features are the wide, gently curved blade, which ends with a well-shaped tip and a false edge, the relatively short slightly angled grip and the large cross-guard with straight symmetrical arms and visible triangular ridges in the middle (Figs. 2-3, 5). A large part of these features can be traced separately in the development of the sabers from Southeastern Europe and Northwestern Asia during the 13th-14th centuries. Another new feature is the appearance of the false edge. However, this is not the place for a similar wide-range analysis.

At this stage, the collection of material and visual evidence does not exclude the possibility that this type of saber originated in West Iran, which was strongly influenced by Mongol fashion. This is revealed by the miniatures from the region, dated to the 14th and 15th centuries. The influence of military fashion of this region over Egypt, Syria

and Asia Minor, is also testified by other examples, like defense equipment. Here we have presented a model of influence, which repeats cyclically from Late Antiquity until the Late Middle Ages. The distribution of the early examples of sabers of the new type namely in Mamluk Egypt and Syria, in the Balkans and its sphere of influence, however, does not exclude, but rather supports the presence of its own development there. Also the possibility of an independent evolution, which led to the appearance of similar shapes in several regions cannot be excluded. Namely in these regions – the Middle East and the Balkans – through strong Ottoman and Mamluk influence over the military fashion of Eastern Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries, became a medium for the distribution and the further development of the new type of sabers. An example for this is also the above-mentioned developed forms, like the sabers of Mehmed II from Topkapi, etc. (Fig. 4). This tradition led to the emergence of the most widely-spread types of sabers in Eastern Europe and the Middle East during the 16th to the early 18th centuries.²⁰ Of course, they have undergone constant development, as result of which the blade became more and more curved, the angle of the hilt more acute, the cross-guard enlarged in dimensions and received new elements, and the cross-section of the blade gained a more complex profile. These are the sabers, which dominated the vast territory, covered by the Ottoman Empire, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Russia and the Tatar lands during the 16th to 18th centuries.

In conclusion it could be stated that the saber from the Nisovo fortress and one from the region of Varna may date to the last decades of the 14th to the first half of the 15th centuries. They reveal the use of these weapons during the decline of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom and the early Ottoman period in the Bulgarian lands. With a level of certainty, we can assume that these weapons stood at the beginning of a line of development, which is not yet properly understood due to the lack of firmly dated examples.

Regarding the examples, presented above – both actual sabers and their depictions in contemporary art, we can assume that the Eastern Balkans, including the Bulgarian lands, played

¹⁷ On this topic, see Īotov (2004, 37-76) and Rabovianov (2019).

¹⁸ As examples for sabers from this period, see Borisov and Sheileva (2000, 248, ris. 1:B), Inkova (2013, 63-85, Figs. 1-2), Dimitrov and Rabovianov (2016, 348), and Khrisimov (2018, 133-136).

¹⁹ For the "Tomić Psalter", its cultural environment and dating, see Dzhurova (2019, 21-55).

²⁰ For example, of such, see Kalmár (1971, 69-86), Gutowski (1997, Nos. 66-87), Astvašaturian (2002, 83-124), Kvasnevich (2005, 9-80), Toichkin (2007), Bashir (2008, 52-75), Dvurechenskii (2013, 39-70), Aydin (2014, 48-86), Dediul'kin and Kurmanovskii (2018).

an important role in the development and the distribution of a new type of saber in Southeastern Europe. This weapon was probably part of the panoply of the Balkan warrior during the late 14th and 15th centuries, and of the Ottoman Turks, who fought against them. An example of these warriors

are the Stratioti and the Hussars,²¹ which emerged at that time, but reached their apogee during the second half of the 15th and the early 16th centuries.

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²¹ The typical for this light cavalry is the limited use of protection armour, and among the weapons is the curved saber, the spear and the crossbow. Reasonably, their appearance is associated with the dominating tactics and weapons and the influence on the military activity in the Eastern Balkans during the 15th century on behalf of the new great power – the Ottoman Turks. For the stratioti and the hussars, see Kovács (2010), Dimitrov (2015), Hucul (2018, 141-145).

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PÓŻNOŚREDNIOWIECZNA SZABLA ZE ZBIORÓW REGIONALNEGO MUZEUM HISTORYCZNEGO W RUSE

Streszczenie

Tematem niniejszego artykułu jest dobrze zachowana szabla, przechowywana w zbiorach Regionalnego Muzeum Historycznego w Ruse pod nr inw. III 2507. Ma ona cechy broni z okresu późnego średniowiecza. Oręż ten jest interesujący nie tylko z uwagi na swój dobry stan zachowania, ale też z uwagi na związek z twierdzą Nisovo we wsi o tej samej nazwie w okręgu Ruse. Dane archeologiczne wskazują, że szabla z Ruse związana była z okresem Drugiego Królestwa Bułgarskiego lub z czasem jego podboju przez Turków Osmańskich w ostatnich dziesięcioleciach XIV w.

Szabla z twierdzy Nisovo oraz szabla z rejonu Warny mogą być datowane na okres od ostatnich dziesięcioleci XIV do pierwszej połowy XV w. Wskazują one, iż broń taka była używana w schyłkowym okresie Drugiego Królestwa Bułgarskiego i we wczesnym okresie osmańskim na ziemiach bułgarskich. Można przyjąć, iż szable takie były początkiem linii

rozwojowej, która jak dotąd nie została w pełni określona, z uwagi na brak pewnie datowanych zabytków.

W odniesieniu do omówionych wyżej zabytków – zarówno zachowanych szabel, jak i ich przedstawień w ówczesnej sztuce – można przyjąć, iż Wschodnie Bałkany, wliczając w to ziemie bułgarskie, odgrywały istotną rolę w rozwoju i rozpowszechnieniu się nowego typu szabli w Europie Południowo-Wschodniej. Broń ta była zapewne częścią wyposażenia wojowników bałkańskich w końcu XIV i w XV w., a także walczących przeciwko nim Turków Osmańskich. Przykładem tych wojowników są stratioci i husarze, którzy pojawili się w tym okresie, acz formacje te osiągnęły swoje apogeum w drugiej połowie XV i w początkach XVI w.

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